

Symphony Can't Lift Audience from Mournful Start

Written by Zach Carstensen

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When the Quad City Symphony Orchestra (QCSO) kicked off its concert season on October 6 at the Adler Theatre, the performance couldn't help but be partly covered in darkness. The shroud of pain and uncertainty and musical weeping of the first half seemed fitting given the tragedies in New York, Washington, D. C., and Pennsylvania. Yet into the second half, a sunnier disposition took over as two famous Ravel works filled the air, but it wasn't quite enough to dispel the darkness.

With the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in mind, QCSO Conductor and Musical Director Donald Schleicher chose to perform *Sospiri*, by Edward Elgar; the mournful piece seemed like a suitable concert-opener and a necessary replacement for the originally scheduled

Academic Festival Overture

. Translated from Italian, "sospiri" means "sighing" or "the sighs," and with its somber, wispy melodies,

Sospiri

expertly captured the collective mood of the United States and the Adler audience. The morose work served as a perfect introduction to Frank Tichelli's

An American Dream

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A Symphony of Songs for Soprano and Orchestra, An American Dream (originally commissioned by the Pacific Symphony Orchestra) is a collection of seven songs based on an original text by librettist Phillip Littell. The work was intended to capture the anxiety of the winding down of the 20th Century, yet the same anxiety, uncertainty, and harshness of music were a poignant examination of our world today.

Neatly divided, the first four songs deal with dark, ominous scenes while the last three songs offer the hope of a new day. The third song stuck out, characterized by chaos and anger with rock elements and harsh melodies abounding. With such a vigorous movement, the singer could have easily been lost under the orchestra, but soprano Camellia Johnson bestrode the music, making sure everyone in attendance heard her. With such a powerful instrument, it's no

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wonder Johnson has often performed Verdi's *Requiem*.

The soprano was able to bring her towering voice down for the three optimistic pieces that end the work, with the final song closing in a sunny major key. Though programmed far in advance of the September 11 attacks, *An American Dream* was a perfect piece given our troubled times.

The second half of the concert brought a distinct change in tone, with two pieces by French composer Maurice Ravel. First, Schleicher chose Ravel's light *Mother Goose Suite*. Originally scored for piano and for four hands, the work highlights Ravel's thirst for fantasy. The QCSO performed the work delightfully, especially in filling out the colorful lushness and sparkle of the fifth movement,

The Fairy Garden

Yet despite its apt playing, the orchestra didn't seem to be able to capture the edge and panache of the first half of the concert. Perhaps they were seduced by the elegant *Mother Goose Suite*

or maybe they were just tired, but the concluding piece, Ravel's Spanish-influenced *Rapsodie Espagnole*

, fell flat. Generally a rousing and fun work, the orchestra was lackluster, failing to express the fury and brilliance that are the hallmarks of Spanish music.

And the piece and its performance failed to bring closure to a concert that began with two sorrowful and meditative works. The QCSO had a chance to provide a full emotional experience but could not seize the moment; while the symphony guided the listener into a mournful state, it failed to lift them up when it was all over.